



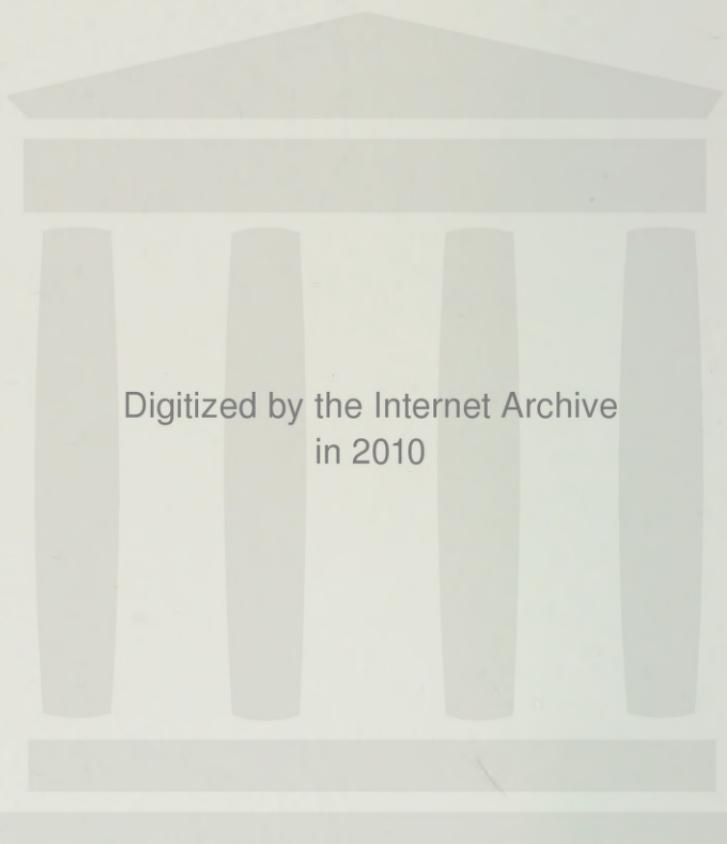
# REACHING FOR THE MAINLAND & SELECTED NEW POEMS



lifetime of tending  
ejia is obsessed with  
eavers—raising fat  
ses to eat, letting them live until  
air feathers droop and drag on the  
art, like the hams of slovenly women.

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER





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REACHING  
FOR THE  
MAINLAND

& SELECTED NEW POEMS

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### Address:

Bilingual Press

Hispanic Research Center

Arizona State University

P.O. Box 872702

Tempe, Arizona 85287-2702

(602) 965-3867

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FOR THE  
MAINLAND

& SELECTED NEW POEMS

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER

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TEMPE, ARIZONA

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*And the tongue is a fire.*      *-James 3:6*



# Reaching for the Mainland

*The Birthplace*

## THEY SAY

They say  
when I arrived,  
traveling light,  
the women who waited  
plugged  
the cracks in the walls  
with rags  
dipped in alcohol  
to keep drafts and demons out.  
Candles were lit  
to the Virgin.

They say  
Mother's breath  
kept blowing them out  
right and left.  
When I slipped  
into their hands  
the room was in shadows.

They say  
I nearly turned away,  
undoing  
the hasty knot of my umbilicus.

They say  
my urge to bleed  
told them I was like a balloon  
with a leak,  
a soul trying to fly away  
through the cracks in the wall.

The midwife sewed  
and the women prayed  
as they fitted  
me for life

in a tight corset of gauze.  
But their prayers  
held me back,  
the bandages held me in,  
and all that night  
they dipped  
their bloody rags.

They say  
Mother slept through it all,  
blowing out  
candles  
with her breath.

## THE WOMAN WHO WAS LEFT AT THE ALTAR

She calls her shadow Juan,  
looking back often as she walks.  
She has grown fat, her breasts huge  
as reservoirs. She once opened her blouse  
in church to show the silent town  
what a plentiful mother she could be.  
Since her old mother died, buried in black,  
she lives alone.  
Out of the lace she made curtains for her room,  
doilies out of the veil. They are now  
yellow as malaria.  
She hangs live chickens from her waist to sell,  
walks to the town swinging her skirts of flesh.  
She doesn't speak to anyone. Dogs follow  
the scent of blood to be shed. In their hungry,  
yellow eyes she sees his face. She takes him  
to the knife time after time.

## HOUSEPAINTER

The flecks are deeply etched  
into the creases of his fingers,  
and the paint will not wash off.  
It was a hilltop house he painted last  
for an old woman going blind  
who wanted it to blend into the sky.  
It took him two weeks working alone,  
and the blue, a hue too dark,  
stood out against the horizon  
like a storm cloud, but since clouds  
had also gathered over her eyes,  
she never knew.  
He explained his life to me,  
a child on my grandfather's lap concerned  
with his speckled hands only because they kept me  
from my treasure hunting in his painter's shed,  
where cans on shelves spilled enamel over  
their lids like tears running down a clown's face.

## LA TRISTEZA

Books. By reading them,  
by writing them, he thinks he has escaped  
the sadness of his race.  
When he returns to the old town,  
open like a violated tomb, bleached bones  
exposed to the sun, he walks bareheaded  
among the people, to show his disdain  
for the sombrero, the hat that humbles.  
He has grown somber and pale  
in the New England winter, ashamed  
of the mahogany skin, the yellow teeth  
of the men who move slow as iguanas  
in the desert. When they greet him,  
their eyes roll up to heaven, each claiming  
to have been his father's most intimate friend.  
Here they never let go of their dead.  
And the women: timid blackbirds, lower  
their eyes in his presence.  
*Damn the humility of the poor that keeps them  
eating dust.* He thinks this, even as he takes  
the girl with skin supple as suede to his hotel,  
where her body spreading under him is a dark stain  
on the clean white sheets he has earned.

## MOONLIGHT PERFORMANCE

The pond opens up to the hill  
like a woman's vanity mirror.  
The naked figure poised on a branch  
overhanging the water steps into the moonlight;  
he sees lights like a maniac's eyes darting  
through the trees playing  
frenzied peek-a-boo with him.  
As the train rounds the last corner,  
he can make out dozens of faces peering  
into the night  
supplying him with a moving audience,  
the engine, with the music and thunder  
necessary for a feat of daring.  
He bounces and leaps as the headlight  
suspends him in space,  
completing the performance.

## ON THE ISLAND I HAVE SEEN

Men cutting cane under a sun relentless  
as an overseer with a quota,  
measuring their days  
with each swing of their machetes,  
mixing their sweat with the sugar  
destined to sweeten half a continent's coffee.

Old men playing dominoes in the plazas  
cooled by the flutter of palms,  
divining from the ivory pieces  
that clack like their bones, the future  
of the children who pass by on their way to school,  
ducklings following the bobbing beak  
of the starched nun who leads them in silence.

Women in black dresses keeping all the holy days,  
asking the priest in dark confessionals  
what to do about the anger in their sons' eyes.  
Sometimes their prayers are answered  
and the young men take their places  
atop the stacked wedding cakes.  
The ones who are lost to God and mothers  
may take to the fields, the dry fields,  
where a man learns the danger or words,  
where even a curse can start a fire.

## THE MULE

I have been loyal for too long.  
My master is gone, and his son  
gazes at me with the eyes of a stranger;  
he does not touch me in friendship  
but prods me in contempt,  
and I must carry his burdens joylessly  
up and down this mountainside.  
My eyes no longer see the rocks  
in my path as clearly,  
yet each step takes me closer  
to the place I have chosen  
on a perfect and unyielding road,  
no matter who leads.

## THE MAN WHO LOST HIS HANDWRITING

There are some who remember Andrés  
when he still had words. In my mother's day  
he was town scribe, directing every event  
with pen and ink.

Legends arose that Don Andrés  
was touched by God. Women came to him  
before naming their children, searching  
his letters like the tarot for symbols. My aunt  
was christened Clorinda del Carmen because he gave  
the C's the wings of an angel. Andrés also sealed deaths  
with his eternal black ink. Don Gonzalo,  
the priest, had been heard to say  
that even Saint Peter would be pleased to let  
a soul into paradise with such a pass.

It was words, they say, that broke Andrés. Two wars  
in two decades, reams of telegrams to transcribe from blue  
to black; all the letters he had written for the town's sons  
stacked on his desk like a tombstone.  
Until letter by letter, he lost his alphabet. In time,  
he forgot the location of his office.

Andrés now scans the streets like a black periscope  
for the bright things he collects:  
Foil, glass, nails—anything  
that catches the sun.  
When he finds what he needs,  
he files it away in its proper pocket.

## WOMAN WATCHING SUNSET

Sitting on the steps of her clapboard house,  
she has only to lift her eyes  
to encompass all of her world,  
as familiar to her as her own reflection.  
The clothes on the line sway  
to the wind's whispered waltz,  
the dog lies limp in the shade,  
one paw throbbing in dream pursuit.  
Under the shadow of an old oak  
leaning over them like a bored chaperone,  
the begonias in their clay pots  
are shy girls waiting to be asked to dance.  
This is the best time,  
when her corner of God's earth is held  
in the fingertips of the retreating sun.  
And tomorrow she will create her world again,  
from scratch.

## GRACE STANDS IN LINE FOR SATURDAY CONFESSION

I have knelt to them,  
pressing my breasts hard against  
their confessional walls.

I have issued them the challenge  
of my mortal sins,  
imagining them bound  
to my secret voice.

I have watched their moist fingers slip  
from bead to bead  
on their worn-down-to-the-wood rosaries,  
and I have listened to the heavy sighs  
of their unctuous absolutions.

I have dared to remind them of the darkness  
in the cathedral, the pungency of flesh,  
that no scented candle can conceal.

## WHAT THE GYPSY SAID TO HER CHILDREN

We are like the dead,  
invisible to those  
who do not want to see,  
and our only protection against  
the killing silence of their eyes is color:  
the crimson of our tents pitched  
like a scream  
in the fields of our foes,  
the amber of our fires  
where we gather to lift our voices  
in the purple lament of our songs.  
And beyond the scope of their senses  
where all colors blend into one,  
we will build our cities of light,  
we will carve them  
out of the granite of their hatred,  
with our own brown hands.

## PUEBLO WAKING

Roosters call their blood back  
from claws wrapped around a post, the dog  
stretched under the mango tree stirs  
dust into the sunlight as he rises, tin roofs  
clamor under the first wave of heat like teapots.  
Windows thrown wide, voices are tossed back  
and forth, picking up talk where it was  
interrupted by the night.

At seven, the church bells sound hollow  
after their long silence. Old women in black veils climb  
the church steps in single file, like a trail  
of worker ants.

In August, penitents travel  
from all parts of the island to this pueblo  
to drag bloody knees up the two hundred steps  
hewn out of a hillside to the shrine  
of the Black Virgin, La Monserrate.  
At her feet they leave jewelry and bolts of cloth  
for the sisters to make vestments. Many  
of the pilgrims have dreams after their visits—numbers  
and colors to decipher during the year.

But on this day,  
Christ's Mother's name is a lament over the late hour,  
a plea to hurry to work, to school, to the store  
for la leche. Noise rises like an approaching train  
until the morning goes round the bend  
in a complication of smells  
with black beans boiling over the coffee's last call,  
as the sting of the midday sun begins to wrap the pueblo  
in the silence of siesta.

## VISITING LA ABUELA

Called in early to soak the day's play from my skin,  
slick as a newborn kitten, to slip into my crinolines,  
in my pink parachute dress, to descend on La Abuela,  
who once a month waited for her generations to come

listen.

In her incense-sweet room, we'd sip cocoa,  
sitting straight-backed on a sofa that insisted we sink.  
I'd watch the old woman's hands,  
folded like fledgling sparrows on her lap,  
swoop up to tuck a curl under her cap,  
and drop again as if too weak to fly for long.  
We'd listen to her tales, complex as cobwebs, until,  
at a sign from Mother, who paid these visits like giving alms,  
I'd kiss the cheek lined like a map to another time,  
and grasping Mother's steady hand,  
I'd rush us out into the sunlight.

## THE GUSANO OF PUERTO RICO

Earthworm, orange as a sunset  
over the brown hills of this island,  
you surface for food only to become  
the tender treat of yellow ants  
who climb your back  
as you bend your head like a servile camel  
to their stings.

Curled around your soft middle,  
eyes buried in your body's spiral,  
you know your end.

You assume the pose of martyr, but deep  
in the warm mud you have left your plentiful,  
wriggling seed—more gusanos than mandibles  
can crush, opening their eyes in the dark,  
without knowledge of sky and sun,  
but with the mortal need to seek the light.

## THE FRUIT VENDOR

A skeletal man pushing a cart  
bright as a carnival, one-eared Gacho  
winds his way through town.

Children follow his red and blue hand-wagon,  
trying to grab the brass bells on a rope,  
mocking his high-pitched call  
of, frutas hoy, y viandas.

Once he had been a player of stringed instruments  
but lost his left ear and hand to the swing  
of a man's machete over a woman's choice of songs.

The matron in a stained smock  
who now moves slow to his call, belly swollen  
by childbirth, was courted in her youth  
to Gacho's boleros.

At each stop he changes the arrangement:  
finding the ripest fruit, he places it on top,  
the spiny breadfruit chaperone the tender bananas,  
the green plantains are soldiers on leave  
surrounding the blushing mangoes. Then he stands back  
and waits for the women to arrive like the despoiling army,  
ignoring the harmony of his design  
with their random selections.

## THE SOURCE

Framed in the doorway of her clapboard house,  
Vieja sits in her cane rocker waiting  
for the coffee trees to rise to her sight  
like red-eyed soldiers startled by the sun's reveille,  
and this world-wake belongs to her.

Early shadows condense to reveal a flamboyant tree  
heavy with blossoms, leaning over the well  
that helped her nurse her generations,  
and her progeny have been like the sunflower  
rather than the rose, scattering their seed.

Yet it all remains fast on this hill,  
this house, the well, herself gathering memories  
like grandchildren to her lap, to watch the day  
climb the hill like her man did so many seasons ago,  
bringing the night on his clothes and on his hands.

## LETTER FROM A CARIBBEAN ISLAND

This island is a fat whore lolling  
tremulous and passive in the lukewarm sea.  
Nature has shamed us like a voluptuous daughter:  
no place to hide from the debauchery  
of sun, wind and vegetation.  
All roads end in the sea,  
and the mountains are like a garment  
shrunk by the heat.  
We are hungry for white, longing for snow.  
So much color corrupts the soul.  
We pray for a different weather, a civil storm,  
one that won't enter our homes  
like a soldier drunk on blood.  
How can we be good Christians here?  
In this tropical Eden we sleep on beds  
soaked in sweat and spend our days  
under a demanding sun that saps  
our good intentions.  
There are no puritans here.  
We throw open our windows to conceive,  
letting the western wind blow life into the seed.  
Sinners all, we pass the time as best we can  
in paradise, waiting for the bridge across the water.

## THE BIRTHPLACE

There is no danger now  
that these featureless hills  
will hold me.

That church  
sitting on the highest one  
like a great hen  
spreading her marble wings  
over the penitent houses  
does not beckon to me.

This dusty road under my feet  
is like any other road  
I have traveled,  
it leads only  
to other roads.

Towns everywhere are the same  
when shadows thicken.

Yet, each window  
casting a square of light,  
that grassy plain under a weighted sky  
turning to plum,  
tell me  
that as surely as my dreams are mine,  
I must be home.

# *The Crossing*

## MOTHER DANCING IN THE DARK

(And Father somewhere in the Pacific)  
She places the needle gently into the worn groove  
and a Mexican tenor strains over the violins,  
Bésame, bésame mucho . . .  
a Mariachi band backs up his demand,  
as Mother sinks into the sofa.  
From our bed where she has left me  
moored to a dreamless sleep, I watch her  
rise over her black skirt  
like the ballerina in my lacquered music-box,  
Como si fuera esta noche la última vez . . .  
lift her cheek to a phantom kiss,  
Que tengo miedo perderte, bésame, bésame mucho . . .  
then bound to the refrain she turns, turns into the shadows  
where she is lost to my sight,  
(And Father somewhere in the Pacific.)

## CROSSINGS

*Step on a crack.*

In a city of concrete it is impossible  
to avoid disaster indefinitely.

You spend your life peering  
downward, looking for flaws,  
but each day more and more fissures  
crisscross your path, and like the lines  
on your palms, they mean something  
you cannot decipher.

Finally, you must choose between  
standing still in the one solid spot you  
have found, or you keep moving  
and take the risk:

*Break your mother's back.*

## MY FATHER IN THE NAVY

Stiff and immaculate  
in the white cloth of his uniform  
and a round cap on his head like a halo,  
he was an apparition on leave from a shadow-world  
and only flesh and blood when he rose from below  
the waterline where he kept watch over the engines  
and dials making sure the ship parted the waters  
on a straight course.

Mother, Brother, and I kept vigil  
on the nights and dawns of his arrivals,  
watching the corner beyond the neon sign of a quasar  
for the flash of white, our father like an angel  
heralding a new day.

His homecomings were the verses  
we composed over the years making up  
the siren's song that kept him coming back  
from the bellies of iron whales  
and into our nights  
like the evening prayer.

## ARRIVAL

When we arrived, we were expelled  
like fetuses  
from the warm belly of an airplane.  
Shocked by the cold,  
we held hands as we skidded  
like new colts on the unfamiliar ice.  
We waited winter in a room sealed  
by our strangeness.  
Watching the shifting tale of the streets,  
our urge to fly toward the sun  
etched in nailprints like tiny wings  
in the gray plaster of the windowsill,  
we hoped all the while  
that lost in the city's monochrome  
there were colors we couldn't yet see.

## LATIN WOMEN PRAY

Latin women pray  
in incense-sweet churches;  
they pray in Spanish to an Anglo God  
with a Jewish heritage.

And this Great White Father,  
imperturbable in His marble pedestal  
looks down upon His brown daughters,  
votive candles shining like lust  
in His all-seeing eyes,  
unmoved by their persistent prayers.

Yet year after year,  
before his image they kneel,  
Margarita, Josefina, María and Isabel,  
all fervently hoping  
that if not omnipotent,  
at least He be bilingual.

## THE WAY MY MOTHER WALKED

She always wore an amulet on a gold chain,  
an ebony fist  
to protect her from the evil eye of envy  
and the lust of men.

She was the gypsy queen of Market Street,  
shuttling her caramel-candy body past  
the blind window of the Jewish tailor  
who did not lift his gaze,  
the Morse code of her stiletto heels sending  
their Mayday-but-do-not-approach into  
the darkened doorways where eyes  
hung like mobiles in the breeze.

Alleys  
made her grasp my hand teaching me  
the braille of her anxiety.

The two flights to our apartment were her holy ascension  
to a sanctuary from strangers where evil  
could not follow on its caterpillar feet and where  
her needs and her fears could be put away  
like matching towels on a shelf.

## SCHOOLYARD MAGIC

Leaning on the chain-link fence of P.S. No. 11,  
my flesh cracking in the bitter breeze of a December day,  
I burrow deep into my clothes and watch the black girls  
jump rope so fast and hot my own skin responds.  
Red, green, tartan coats balloon up around  
longstem legs, making them exotic flowers and birds.  
They sing a song to the beat of the slap-slap  
of a clothesline on concrete:

*A sailor went to sea, sea, sea,  
To see what he could see, see, see,  
And all that he could see, see, see,  
Was the bottom of the deep, blue,  
Sea, sea, sea. . .*

The brick building framing their play,  
the rusted fire-escape hanging over their heads,  
the black smoke winding above in spirals—  
all of it is wished away,  
as I let my blood answer the summons of their song,  
drawing my hands free from all my winter folds,  
I clap until my palms turn red,  
joining my voice to theirs,  
rising higher than I ever dared.

## CLAIMS

Last time I saw her, Grandmother  
had grown seamed as a Bedouin tent.  
She had claimed the right  
to sleep alone, to own  
her nights, to never bear  
the weight of sex again, or to accept  
its gift of comfort, for the luxury  
of stretching her bones.  
She'd carried eight children,  
three had sunk in her belly, naufragos,  
she called them, shipwrecked babies  
drowned in her black waters.  
*Children are made in the night and  
steal your days  
for the rest of your life, amen.* She said this  
to each of her daughters in turn. Once she had made a pact  
with man and nature and kept it. Now like the sea,  
she is claiming back her territory.

## A PHOTOGRAPH OF MOTHER AT FIFTEEN HOLDING ME

Still honey-melon round  
from recent motherhood,  
she holds me, a limp thing,  
away from her,  
like children hold their baby dolls,  
smiling down shyly  
at her amazing deed.  
The dark arms look strong,  
not too long away  
from playground volleyball.  
Her white wedgies face each other  
in pigeon-toed uncertainty.

## WALKING TO CHURCH

Latin girls don't just walk,  
they sway sensuously  
to the rhythm  
of some secret melody.

Demure as sidewalk Mona Lisas,  
eyes cast downward  
in mocking modesty  
from passersby, attempting to conceal  
any intimation of the sudden surges  
of their adolescent hearts  
that put such spring into their steps.

Moving just behind them  
all in black is Mamá,  
silent, somber sentinel,  
also swaying,  
a secret song also  
playing  
on her mind.

## “EN MIS OJOS NO HAY DÍAS”

*from Borges's poem  
“The Keeper of the Books”*

Back before the fire burned behind his eyes  
in the blast furnace which finally consumed him,  
Father told us about the reign of little terrors  
of his childhood, beginning  
at birth with his father who cursed him  
for being the twelfth and the fairest,  
too blond and pretty to be from his loins,  
so he named him the priest's pauper son.  
Father said the old man kept  
a mule for labor  
wine in his cellar  
a horse for sport  
a mistress in town  
and a wife to bear him daughters  
to send to church  
to pray for his soul  
and sons,  
to send to the fields  
to cut the cane  
and raise the money  
to buy his rum.  
He was only ten when he saw his father  
split a man in two with his machete  
and walk away proud to have rescued his honor  
like a true hombre.  
Father always wrapped these tales  
in the tissue paper of his humor,  
and we'd listen at his knees,

rapt, warm and safe  
in the blanket of his caring.  
But he himself could not be saved.  
To this day his friends still ask,  
“What on earth drove him mad?”  
Remembering Prince Hamlet I reply,  
“Nothing on earth,”  
but no one listens to ghost stories anymore.

## MEMORY OF LA ABUELA

My grandfather tells me  
about the first time he saw her,  
a brown figure against the sun,  
skirt held up as if beginning  
a dance, carrying her shoes  
in one hand as she crossed her father's pasture,  
pausing now and then  
to pick a wildflower.  
Ending the anecdote, the old man  
lowers his eyes and falls deep into silence,  
perhaps seeing a young woman gather her skirts  
in a green pasture. In the next telling,  
she dances.

## MEDITATION ON MY HANDS

They are always folding on each other,  
scared pink mice or marsupial embryos  
seeking a teat.

Your fingers, Mother, were a vise  
strong and quick with the sure grip  
of the blind,  
always finding the tender spot  
on my arm to pinch when I had said too much  
in front of the company.

But to be fair,  
I would never have been a dropped baby,  
though your embrace left me marked  
with long tapering stripes.

Mother, with those talented hands,  
you should have been a pianist, or one  
of those Borgia women who strangled  
their unfaithful lovers with fingers  
like silk threads.

## SHE HAS BEEN A LONG TIME DYING

Skin like a crushed paper bag  
and a voice like a shovel striking dry ground,  
she calls us to come closer as she rises on her elbows  
like some skinny bird poised for flight.  
We file past her in generations,  
looking her over like a museum piece we fear to touch;  
smelling the decay, we try to rush  
but she will not let go,  
pressing her sharp fingers into our flesh,  
drawing our mouths to hers,  
breathing death into us and calling us  
her babies.

## TREASURE

It is a sun-blanchéd day.  
His face rises pale as a September moon  
over the black suit.  
He sits straight-backed on a cement block.  
In the background white curtains billow like wings  
over his shoulders, or like a summons  
to a cool interior. But he is solid against  
their movement, staring through  
squinting lids past the camera to the field  
he would soon harvest, or into the future  
at a grandchild he did not live to know, who  
has lately found his familiar face glued to the lid  
of an old jewelry box, enduring like Spanish gold  
among the gaudy trinkets.

*The Habit of Movement*

## THE OTHER

A sloe-eyed dark woman shadows me.  
In the morning she sings  
Spanish love songs in a high falsetto,  
filling my shower stall  
with echoes.

She is by my side  
in front of the mirror as I slip  
into my tailored skirt and she  
into her red cotton dress.

She shakes out her black mane as I  
run a comb through my closely cropped cap.  
Her mouth is like a red bull's eye  
daring me.

Everywhere I go I must  
make room for her; she crowds me  
in elevators where others wonder  
at all the space I need.

At night her weight tips my bed, and  
it is her wild dreams that run rampant  
through my head exhausting me. Her heartbeats,  
like dozens of spiders carrying the poison  
of her restlessness,  
drag their countless legs  
over my bare flesh.

## ROOM AT THE EMPIRE

It is the hour of the exodus.

From my hotel window I watch the biography  
of this day unfold: Two women cross 63rd, burdens  
on their arms—on their shoulders they carry  
the skins of animals.

In step they enter the delicatessen

where they will meet others of their kind.

Slouched in a doorway a drunk lies unconscious, his boots  
jutting up like stone markers in the path of pedestrians.

A couple kiss as they wait for “Walk,” a crowd gathers  
behind the two, who part faces and join hands.

As in an old newsreel they all move forward at once,  
dispersing when they reach the other side.

The drunkard stretches, yawning: The rush is over.

Soon the sun pales, a movie screen before the credits,  
and in the gathering mist above Lincoln Center  
points of light begin to flicker.

Yellow taxis cruise the boulevard like frantic bees  
pollinating the city.

The evening drifts away in waves of traffic.

In the new silence I find

I have tuned my breathing to bells of a distant cathedral.

## TO MY BROTHER, LATELY MISSED

Crustaceans from the same waters, we  
keep our vessels separate though  
the currents have flowed in our way more  
often these seasons,

And, as time softens the walls between  
our chambers,  
the echoes of your life sounds have touched me,  
but I, concentrating on my pearl, have chosen  
the seclusion of my species,

The moon determines your directions now, brother,  
while I remain imbedded  
in coral, hoarding my treasure in  
the silence of a multitude, alone  
in this tenement of captives.

## LOST ANGELS

You may find them in the gray mist  
that rises from city sidewalks,  
near piles of trash,  
like discarded Christmas ornaments.

I have seen them on the frozen clotheslines  
of tenements, masquerading  
as the long-sleeved shirts of working men  
arm-in-arm in a dozen dingy crucifixions,  
in the globes of breath  
of the park-bench wino sleeping,  
in the pink spittle that clings  
to his chin like death.

Look for them in the stained plaster  
above the insomniac's bed.

It's possible to see them swimming  
like a mote in the eyes of a friend  
you haven't seen for some time,  
who tells you she has heard the wind  
calling her name,  
who speaks recklessly of the proximity of clouds.

## CLOSED CASKET

The bed you slept on was never large enough  
for your restless sleep, Father.

After a twelve-to-six shift it was fun  
to watch you count down into exhaustion  
in starts and jerks as if some mad marionettist  
were pulling your limbs with invisible strings.  
How does it feel to be sleeping  
on this narrow bed?

They have closed the door on you  
who never needed privacy to sleep;  
you, who took your sleep in boxer's rounds,  
waking with glazed and swollen eyes  
to an alarm I never heard  
no matter how hard I listened.

## WE ARE ALL CARRIERS

Now don't think my opinions on this matter are final,  
but I believe that we are all  
born equipped with a gland of madness,  
though its exact location is still unknown;  
it hangs in the vault of our skulls  
like a pendulum marking time,  
thin-skinned like a grape  
and popping full of black bile.

In some people it grows into their flesh  
like an embryo or a tumor,  
in others it swings by a thread exposed  
so that a sudden jar or playful shove,  
a shrill note or blinding light, will rupture  
the delicate membrane causing poison to pour out  
like India ink seeping into the brain and  
burning away at memory and choice.  
From such accidents are snipers made,  
and heroes of war.

Most often, though, the damage is minor:  
a pinprick leak, slow and almost imperceptible  
like the waterdrop that bores a hole into the rock,  
accounts for those of us who tread lightly  
as we cross the bamboo bridges our enemy  
has built in our path,  
those of us who daily waver  
between writing a poem and slashing our wrists.

## IN YUCATÁN

1.

Here all day it is high noon, sun baking people  
the color of clay. At Uxmal and Chichén-Itzá I have seen  
the profiles of an ancient race carved on the golden  
sandstone  
of pyramids; at the hotel in Mérida I see them again, the faces  
of desk clerk, bellhop and maid. The woman who makes my  
bed  
bends like a priest over the sacrificial altar; the clay figure  
of Chac-Mool, the god of rain, sits on the dresser, gazing  
at the nape of her neck where she has wound a braid  
into a symbol of eternity. Ending her labors she turns,  
and I see the Mayan features carved in angles on the solar  
plains,  
the calendar stone, of a face certain in the knowledge of its  
past.

"Es todo, Señora," she says. It is all.

2.

Kukulcán crawls. Quetzalcóatl calls. The serpent gods rule  
time.  
The Toh bird keeps time with its tufted tail swinging  
like a metronome. The Maya knew time, giving each day  
a name for centuries past their own fall, which they saw  
as clearly as the stars each night reflected on a golden water  
bowl.  
The church bells of Mérida call; the Maya also know the  
tongue  
of bells. From the window I watch a beggar drag his reluctant  
legs

across the cobblestones to the church steps. The women  
sweep  
by him, a flock of doves in their rebozos. "Caridad,  
por Dios, caridad," he calls waving his cane, scattering them.

3.

At dusk the men come in from the fields  
where from light to dark they have arced the rows  
of the henequen plant in the same pendulum motion  
their ancestors used. Civilization is a habit.  
At day's end they will enter their clay huts, dank  
as caverns when Chac sends the rains, to eat the good  
maize, watch the world through the flickering magic  
of the televisions, and finally to sleep in hammocks  
made from the hemp they have harvested.  
Time is a serpent that circles the world.  
Once upon a time men the color of clay saw the coming  
of men pale as death, pale as the moon that hangs distant  
and mute over all of us, this night in Yucatán.

## RETURNING FROM THE MAYAN RUINS

On a night thick with the smells of a recent rain,  
I drive through an Indian village where lights  
from the round clay huts called chozas make it seem  
like a jack-o-lantern town where for the stranger driving  
through, every night is Halloween.

I inhale the air weighted with smells of the damp earth,  
the ripe carcass of a dog I swerve to miss, smouldering  
heaps of rubbish at every unexpected bend.

Passing an open doorway I glimpse a family sleeping  
in layers, each body cocooned in the webbing of a hammock;  
nearest the road is the woman whose braid falls to the dirt  
floor like a black rope, on her breast an infant suckles.

Shifting to a more silent gear,  
I leave these new Mayas swaying ceaselessly  
to the movement of the earth, suspended in a deeper sleep  
than their ancestors could have known.

## POSTCARD FROM A FOREIGN COUNTRY

So much left out of the picture.  
See the little houses gathered  
around the cathedral like girls  
making their First Communion,  
notice how the old church leans  
toward the town as if listening  
to its whispered confessions.

They say the mortar is crumbling  
under the stones.

I am standing in the church's shadow  
as I write you this note,  
a shadow it has thrown  
on this town for centuries,  
watching the night erase this scene  
like a drawing on a blackboard,  
a message scribbled hastily:  
only postcard days are forever.

## WHEN YOU COME TO MY FUNERAL

*for Betty Owen*

Bring conga drums and maracas,  
meet at the statue in the plaza,  
the one of Columbus pointing his index finger at the sky  
as if to say, "you have found your way, amigos."  
Be there at 3 o'clock, the hour of the siesta,  
when the aroma of perking coffee draws laborers  
from the fields to the cool shade  
of kitchens and cantinas.

Bring your music and board the bus that goes  
to the shore where I always wanted to live.  
The trail is treacherous and narrow and the driver  
will curse the day and embrace the wheel with  
his strong brown arms, he was my friend,  
invite him down for the party.

There will be rum punch and pasteles,  
and if you bring a sad word for me leave it on the porch  
like a wet umbrella, or better still, toss it out to sea.  
I will be among you gathered at the edge of the Atlantic  
to compose a new kind of dirge, one of vigorous beat  
and a rocking cadence,  
one that will take me out like a favorable current,  
into the silence of my new way.

## STREET PEOPLE

*Miami, 1983*

In the mornings you see them  
sucked like leeches to the walls  
of public buildings, hanging on  
against the gale storm  
of a night on the streets.

They speak to us  
with their bodies' occupation  
of pestilence, death  
by osmosis, the contagion  
of dispossession.

If we must pass them, we brace  
ourselves with indifference.

It clings to us like the odor  
of garlic. We walk fast,  
each of us holding tight  
to whatever we most fear to lose.

## BECAUSE MY MOTHER BURNED HER LEGS IN A FREAK ACCIDENT

I am flying south over the Atlantic  
toward one of those islands  
arranged like shoes on a blue carpet.  
She lies in bed waiting for the balm  
of my presence, her poor legs pink  
as plucked hens. When her gas stove exploded  
as she bent over her soup, the flames grabbed  
her ankles like a child throwing a tantrum.  
So she has summoned me transatlantically,  
her voice sounding singed as if the fire  
had burned her from within.  
She wants me there to resurrect her flesh,  
to reverse time, to remind her of the elastic  
skin that once sustained me.  
She wants me to come home and save her,  
as only a child who has been forgotten and forgiven can.

## PROGRESS REPORT TO A DEAD FATHER

“Keep it simple, keep it short,”  
you’d say to me, “Get to the point,”  
when the hoard of words I had stored for you  
like bits of bright tinsel in a squirrel’s nest  
distracted you from the simple “I love you”  
that stayed at tongue-tip.

Father, I am no more succinct now than when  
you were alive; the years have added reams  
to my forever manuscript.

Lists rile me now in your stead,  
labeled “things to do today” and  
“do not forget” lists of things  
I will never do, lists that I write  
to remind me that I can never forget.

I can still hear you say,  
“A place for everything and  
everything in its place.”  
But chaos is my roommate now, Father,  
and he entertains often.

Simplicity is for the strong-hearted,  
you proved that with your brief  
but thorough life. Your days were stacked  
like clean shirts in a drawer.  
Death was the point you drove home  
the day your car met the wall,  
your forehead split in two, not in your familiar frown,  
but forever—a clean break.  
“It was quick,” the doctor said. “He didn’t feel a thing.”

It was not your fault that love could not be  
so easily put in its right place  
where I could find it when I needed it,  
as the rest of your things, Father.

## BAPTISM AT LA MISIÓN

“José Juan Pablo González, I anoint you  
in the name of all that’s holy,  
a Christian and one of us.”

I hold him high above the ecstatic crowd  
in consecration, and he screams in terror  
of space. Longing for solitude  
and darkness, he hates the drowning and  
the hands, the grinning faces,  
the voices singing praises.

He wants only to suck his toes,  
and wrap his mother’s flesh around him.

## FEVER

My daughter is burning and may  
burst into flames  
before night's end.  
Pressing her limp fingers to my palm  
I will them to curl,  
but reflex has been left  
on the other side of the hot door.  
Fear touches the nape of my neck,  
making me reach back through time,  
absorbing child into flesh,  
to cool her in my waters.

## A POEM

*for Jim Hall*

I wish I could write a poem like the 2:30 sun  
that shocks you every afternoon  
as if it were a hot shower pouring  
over your shoulders through your office window  
so that you are forced to leave  
the poems you have been tending  
while you maneuver the blinds,  
turn on the lights, resettle.

I wish I could write an inopportune poem,  
one that would make you rise complaining  
of the heat and the blinding light.

A poem I would write like a fetish;  
an undesirable unavoidable poem,  
one that would change your life a little  
like the Great Vowel Shift did English,  
one that would make you want to get up  
in the middle of the night to search  
for things you didn't know were lost.

Gulls build their nests on telephone poles,  
laying their eggs on the warm terminals.  
Could the currents of conversation  
become a part of the awakening, subtly changing  
the embryos through sounds seeping  
into their sacs?  
Words of warning of their season: inclement  
weather, ships lost at sea, hearts broken  
with a click.  
The fledgling that fears to trust its instincts  
and the wind, wobbling as it perches  
over the highway, perhaps listened  
too long to the tone of hasty departures, the rise  
and fall of voices a warning of the dangers  
of flight, the sudden silence a clue  
to the message of shells: that nothing lasts.

## THE HABIT OF MOVEMENT

Nurtured in the lethargy of the tropics,  
the nomadic life did not suit us at first.  
We felt like red balloons set adrift  
over the wide sky of this new land.  
Little by little we lost our will to connect  
and stopped collecting anything heavier  
to carry than a wish.  
We took what we could from books borrowed  
in Greek temples, or holes in the city walls,  
returning them hardly handled.

We carried the idea of home on our backs  
from house to house, never staying  
long enough to learn the secret ways of wood  
and stone, and always the blank stare  
of undraped windows behind us  
like the eyes of the unmourned dead.  
In time we grew rich in dispossession  
and fat with experience.  
As we approached but did not touch others,  
our habit of movement kept us safe  
like a train in motion—  
nothing could touch us.

## LESSON ONE: I WOULD SING

In Spanish, "cantaría" means I would sing,  
"Cantaría bajo de la luna,"  
I would sing under the moon.  
"Cantaría cerca de tu tumba,"  
By your grave I would sing,  
"Cantaría de una vida perdida,"  
Of a wasted life I would sing,  
If I may, if I could, I would sing.  
In Spanish the conditional  
is the tense of dreamers,  
of philosophers, fools, drunkards,  
of widows, new mothers, small children,  
of old people, cripples, saints, and poets.  
It is the grammar of expectation and  
the formula for hope; "Cantaría, amaría, viviría,"  
Please repeat after me.

# Selected New Poems



## THE DREAM OF BIRTH

Her voice as familiar as my own,  
scrapes the ocean floor,  
coming through ragged with static during the call  
from Puerto Rico. She is staying at her sister's house  
until she finds a new place for herself—has called  
to say she is moving again and to share the horror  
prompting her flight.

On the first night of deep sleep in the old house  
she had rented back on native soil—a place  
she would decorate with our past, where  
yellowed photographs of a young man in khaki  
army issue (the way she chooses to remember her husband)  
and my brother and me as sepia-toned babies in their chipped  
frames,  
a place where she could finally begin to collect  
her memories like jars of preserves on a shelf—  
there, she had lain down to rest on her poster bed centered  
in a high-ceilinged room, exhausted from the labor  
of her passage, and dreamed  
she had given birth to one of us again. She felt the weight  
of a moist, wriggling mass on her chest, the greedy mouth  
seeking a milk-heavy breast, then suddenly—real pain—  
piercing as a newborn infant's cry—yanking her  
out of her dream. In the dark she felt the awful heft  
of the thing stirring over her. Flipping on the light  
she saw, to her horror, a bat clinging to her gown,  
its hallucinated eyes staring up from the shroud of black  
wings,

hanging on, hanging on, with perfect little fingers,

as she,

wild with fear and revulsion, struggled free of her clothes,  
throwing the bundle hard against the wall. By daylight  
she had returned to find the rust-colored stain streaked  
on the white plaster, and the thing still fluttering  
in the belly of the dress. She had dug a tiny grave  
with her gardening spade on the spot  
where she would have planted roses.

## THROUGH CLIMATE CHANGES

He waits  
in her widow's living room  
where she has not removed  
Father's photograph  
from its vantage point  
on the mantel.

I have traveled all day  
through climate changes,  
from north to south,  
to see her.

On the drive from the airport  
she tells me about the man,  
who will *never, never* . . .  
take my father's place.

I inhale deeply,  
the air heavy  
with subtropical moisture,  
her perfume—his favorite—  
now intensified  
by the closeness, the heat.  
The familiar smells  
call up the times  
when curled in the backseat  
I trusted my parents  
to take me  
where they would.

Now exhausted and dizzy  
from the journey,

I watch my mother's hands  
gripping the wheel—  
the subtle map of veins  
becoming bas-relief, tracing  
the same country as mine  
clasped on my lap.

As we travel down a road  
lined with mango trees,  
branches sagging  
with the weight of the fruit,  
I listen in silence  
to her Spanish lament  
with its refrain  
of sola, triste,  
la vida, el amor.  
I am defeated  
by the beauty of the words,  
or simply beaten down  
by the blazing sun  
magnified through glass.

When we walk into her house,  
she turns into a shy girl,  
introducing me formally  
as if I were a diplomat  
from a foreign land,  
to the timid man  
in a starched, white shirt  
embroidered in patterns  
I recognize from the past.

The open palm he extends  
is both a greeting

and a plea.  
Before I respond,  
I look up at my father,  
stern in his frame,  
and I reject the power  
granted me by grief.

Instead  
I reach for the hand  
of this man who loves my mother.

## PHOTOGRAPHS OF MY FATHER

On my walls there are three  
photographs of my father.  
In one he is a young recruit  
standing *at ease*,  
third from the left  
with his platoon.  
In another he has rank  
on his cap—a formal  
pose in a studio,  
intended for his mother.  
In the last, a blowup  
from my mother's wallet  
taken by a machine  
in a foreign port, he is  
a melancholy petty officer  
in navy blues. Hazy  
like a ghost sighting,  
creased from her handling,  
it is my favorite.

These are the survivors  
from a day of fury. One morning  
in my childhood, on his way  
out to sea, he had sat  
alone in the living room,  
and without hurry, with care,  
cut himself out of our family.  
Book after book.  
I watched him work  
from my room, knowing  
his actions were prelude  
or aftermath to family strife.

My mother in the kitchen  
holding her coffee cup  
with both hands, also waited.

On the floor  
my father's image lay  
like peelings from an apple.  
In his hands the scissors glinted  
at the eye and snapped  
like a live thing.

Nothing more. Just picture albums  
shameful as a vandalized church,  
never seen by me again. And years  
after his death, my need to find  
his face revealed in innocence,  
unguarded, as I never knew it.  
This vulnerable young man, this face  
that fills me with grief and longing.  
I am trying to believe in this boy.

## LETTER FROM HOME IN SPANISH

She writes to me as if we still shared  
the same language. The page  
a laden sky, filled with flying letters  
suspended just above the lines  
like blackbirds on the horizon;  
the accents—something smaller  
they are pursuing.

She says:

“after a lifetime of tending to people,  
our vieja is obsessed  
with useless endeavors—raising fat hens  
she refuses to eat, letting them live  
until their feathers droop and drag  
on the dirt, like the hems  
of slovenly women.

“Listen,”  
she writes, forgetting that the words  
cannot pull me by the elbow, “she will not pick  
the roses she grows, so that walking  
through her garden is like following a prostitute—  
the smell chokes you; makes you  
want to loosen your dress.

“She fills her house with old things:  
baby pictures she misnames, mistaking me  
for you; undoing the generations; yellowed ads  
for beauty products and clothes; headlines  
from the War; her last child’s obituary—  
the one who never tasted sugar,  
then died of something simple.

“She has no use now  
for those of us who survived. The other women  
and I take turns at her side, but if we burn  
a light in the dark rooms she prefers,  
she covers her face as if ashamed.  
If we dust the picture frames, she claims  
we are trying to erase the past.

“But, basta. Enough for now.”

I read her letter aloud, for the sound  
of Spanish, and it becomes a *kyrie*,  
a litany in a mass for the dead.  
I take each vowel on my tongue.  
*La vieja* brings tears to my eyes  
like incense; *la muerte*  
sticks in my throat like ashes.

Her blessing is a row of black crosses  
on a white field.

## *Three Poems in Memory of Mamá (Grandmother)*

### COLD AS HEAVEN

Before there is a breeze again  
before the cooling days of Lent, she may be gone.  
My grandmother asks me to tell her  
again about the snow.  
We sit on her white bed  
in this white room, while outside  
the Caribbean sun winds up the world  
like an old alarm clock. I tell her  
about the enveloping blizzard I lived through  
that made everything and everyone the same;  
how we lost ourselves in drifts so tall  
we fell through our own footprints;  
how wrapped like mummies in layers of wool  
that almost immobilized us, we could only  
take hesitant steps like toddlers  
toward food, warmth, shelter.  
I talk winter real for her,  
as she would once conjure for me to dream  
at sweltering siesta time,  
cool stone castles in lands far north.  
Her eyes wander to the window,  
to the teeming scene of children  
pouring out of a yellow bus, then to the bottle  
dripping minutes through a tube  
into her veins. When her eyes return to me,  
I can see she's waiting to hear more  
about the purifying nature of ice,  
how snow makes way for a body,

how you can make yourself an angel  
by just lying down and waving your arms  
as you do when you say  
good-bye.

## THE BODY KNOWS

The doctor's hands  
leave my grandmother frozen  
to the sheets, shivering.  
The well-chosen words of her children  
make her button her robe to her neck.  
She asks for more cover, for a sweater  
and socks, though the Puerto Rican sun  
slashes through venetian blinds  
defeating the a.c., wilting the petals  
so the roses hang over the rim  
as if they had fainted in their vase.

The old woman cannot be made warm.  
The vital signs screens inform her  
of the coming of winter, a foreign season  
the body knows,  
and she is preparing to step out  
into the breath-stopping cold.

## NOCHE NUEVE

I rush in from a standby day of flights  
in time for the last of a twelve-rosary novena,  
a purgatory for the survivors gathered in this last gasp  
of a scorching summer to help Mamá's soul escape  
the field of thorny bushes somewhere between earth  
and heaven, where her white cotton slip  
may have gotten snagged on her way up.

The tireless rezadora, hired at a weekly wage  
to lead us in the loops of Hail Marys, counts off  
sets on her worn wooden beads, speaks  
Mamá's given name, without the Doña  
she earned in this life,  
for she is now a naked spirit like the rest.  
One of us always starts up or sighs, rudely awakened  
from the lull of repetition by the too-familiar words  
spoken by a stranger. But no one may object:  
we are negotiating for the key to the comfortable room  
where our tired matriarch will spend eternity. If only  
we can say it enough times,  
God, the gatekeeper, Mary, the housemother, Saint Peter,  
the hard-of-hearing custodian of the garden  
of rare white orchids, the kind she spent a lifetime  
yearning to cultivate, may respond. Then  
maybe we can rise  
from our hard folding chairs branded with the name  
of the funeral home, to be returned. We can toast  
her memory with the customary hot chocolate and crackers,  
kiss her photo on the little altar of wilting tropical flowers  
from her backyard and the FDS bouquets

called in by mainland descendants,  
all the blossoms now equally redolent  
as flores para los muertos; and go home  
to face our private grief.

## Acknowledgments Continued

*New Mexico Humanities Review*: "Latin Women Pray," in Vol. 4, No. 1 (1981); *Nosotras: Latina Literature Today*, eds. María del Carmen Boza, Beverly Silva, and Carmen Valle (Binghamton, N.Y.: Bilingual Press, 1986): "The Other," and "They Say"; *Orphic Lute*: "Treasure," in Spring Issue (1984); *The Panhandler*: "We Are All Carriers," in No. 13 (1983); *The Pawn Review*: "Because My Mother Burned Her Legs in a Freak Accident," in Vol. 15 (1984); *Poets On: Barriers*: "Meditation on My Hands," Vol. 8, No.1 (1984); *Prairie Schooner*: "The Woman Who Was Left at the Altar," and "Claims," in Vol. 59, No. 1 (1985); *St Croix Review*: "Woman Watching Sunset," and "A Photograph of Mother at Fifteen Holding Me," in Vol. 15, No. 2 (1982); *South Florida Poetry Review*: "Closed Casket," in Vol. 1, No. 2 (1984); *Southern Humanities Review*: "Moonlight Performance," in Vol. 6, No. 3 (1982); *Southern Poetry Review*: "In Yucatán," and "Returning from the Mayan Ruins," in Vol. 23, No. 2 (1983) and "La Tristeza," in Vol. 24, No. 2 (1984); *Tendril*: "Letter from a Caribbean Island," in Seventh Anniversary Issue, No. 19-20 (1985); *Woman of Her Word: Hispanic Women Write*, ed. Evangelina Vigil (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1983): "What the Gypsy Said To Her Children," and "Progress Report To A Dead Father." In addition, several poems in this book were first part of a limited edition chapbook, *The Native Dancer* (Bourbonnais, IL: Pteranodon Press, 1981).

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This collection of poetry by the acclaimed Puerto Rican writer Judi Ortiz Cofer includes several new works as well as the original poem from her *Reaching for the Mainland* which appeared in *Triple Crown* (1987). Taken together, the poems in this volume provide a good overview of the work of a major poet.

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Judith Ortiz Cofer, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1952, has published several books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry including *Terms of Survival* (1987), *The Line of the Sun* (1989), and *The Latin Deli* (1993). Her work has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays*, *The Norton Book of Women's Lives*, *The Pushcart Prize* anthology, the *O. Henry Prize Stories*, and others. Among numerous recognitions, she has received a PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in nonfiction and fellowships from the NEA and the Witter Bynner Foundation. She is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia.

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